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Brolly, R. (2013). Beyond the Obvious: A visual textual analysis of the value of commercial signs. In *5th Annual Research Student Conference in Art and Design Centre for Art, Design, Research and Experimentation University of Wolverhampton*

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### **Published in:**

5th Annual Research Student Conference in Art and Design Centre for Art, Design, Research and Experimentation University of Wolverhampton

### **Publication Status:**

Published (in print/issue): 21/06/2013

### **Document Version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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# Presentation - PhD Conference 2013 Interactivity/interpassivity

University Of Wolverhampton

Panel for presentation - Environment & Visual Narratives

## Beyond the Obvious:

A visual textual analysis of the value of commercial signs



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## Abstract

Signs punctuate the urban environment, ranging in form, format and purpose. They provide information about the world in which we live. Commercial signs particularly inform as to the affordances of place, indicate where services or goods are available, linking information to individual and, through their text and discourses, linking individual to place. This paper employs an interdisciplinary approach to investigate how the role of commercial signs extends beyond their obvious function, through observation of further levels of signification within their visual text. Examples provided are from images gathered during multi-sited ethnographic field studies undertaken in the city of Belfast.

People are active and dynamic in the urban environment, signs are generally static objects, artefacts; however, it may be argued that they cannot be passive. Just as people interact directly or indirectly with others in the urban environment, so too do they interact with signs – even when not engaged in the act of reading or interpreting their messages, signs provide visual stimulus and environmental cues as to location and safety of the individual. Clusters of commercial signs attract users to places during the day and illuminate at night – where there are signs there are eyes and there is surveillance – they aid wayfinding, forming vital components of the cognitive map. This paper argues that even when commercial signs are not the subject of deliberate or focussed interaction, the aura of these signs, through their location, shape, form, colour and condition, remains perceptible by, and of value to, the individual in a sign-dense environment.

*'Most of us take our surroundings for granted. We subconsciously scan the trees, the shop windows and other familiar landmarks as we make our way and we register a vague pleasure in the scene, or equally vague dislike. But our conscious relationship with it is by way of the things which take our fancy, or may affect us. Words especially get noticed for the latter reason, and because they convey information about the world we live in directly, unlike, say, the sky, which has to be interpreted'.*

**- Jock Kinneir**



# Discussion on what we mean here by signs

Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as signifying something – referring to or standing for something other than itself’.

– Daniel Chandler

- Signs as **tangible objects, artefacts** within the urban environment of the construct of the city.
- The obvious function of the commercial sign is to denote the purpose of the building and to indicate what goods or services may be found in the commercial premise host to the sign.
- *‘that which presents itself quite naturally to the mind’*  
**Denotative** level of meaning.
- Other indicators on signs: Relays of meaning are without definitive end. Reliant on knowledge, experience and culture of the interpreter. **Conotative** layer/s of meaning.

# How commercial signs are interpreted – Semiotics

- For the non-professional – the individual, untrained in the principles and values which inform the science behind decoding signs – travelling the built environment, an awareness of semiotics may be unlikely, yet the methods used to interpret the messages in the sign would still involve decoding.
- Even in the absence of an awareness of the principles and process, semiotics would still be employed.
- As the nature of the built environment changes, so too do signs, there exists a symbiotic relationship between signs and place, so an analysis of signs must be indexical. **Geosemiotics**

‘This shift from abstract meaning potential to actual, real-world meaning is the property of indexicality’.

– Scollon and Scollon

# Methodology to evidence signs in place

Fieldwork – city centre and arterial routes of Belfast x5



Antrim Road



Lisburn Road



Falls Road

Also Ormeau & Newtownards



## Signs in city centre

- Homogeneous signs of the city-centre, where big business and global brands may have to adhere to detailed specifications protecting the brand image.



# Signs on arterial routes

- Bespoke nature of signs on the arterial routes allows for a freedom of expression by the commissioners



If as Lebevre advocates, places are socially produced – created by those living in that place, signs are the physical and material manifestation of the discourses of that place. It follows that there must be cultural evidence in signs, through their visual language, graphic narratives and use of colour, materials, lettering, condition and presentation.



# Function of commercial signs

- Commercial signs particularly indicate the 'affordances of place'. Appleton's prospect and refuge theory
- From a basic level of sustenance, to items of luxury – where one might be able to buy food, bread, milk, meat, locate furnishing's for a home, or acquire services, such as those of a dentist or doctor.
- It is the signs on the buildings to which the individual looks in order to gauge where these goods may be made available.

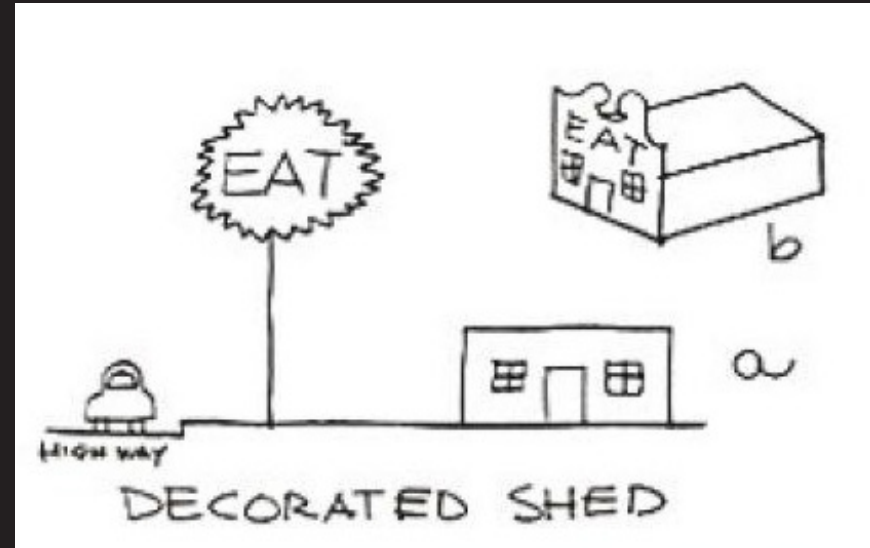
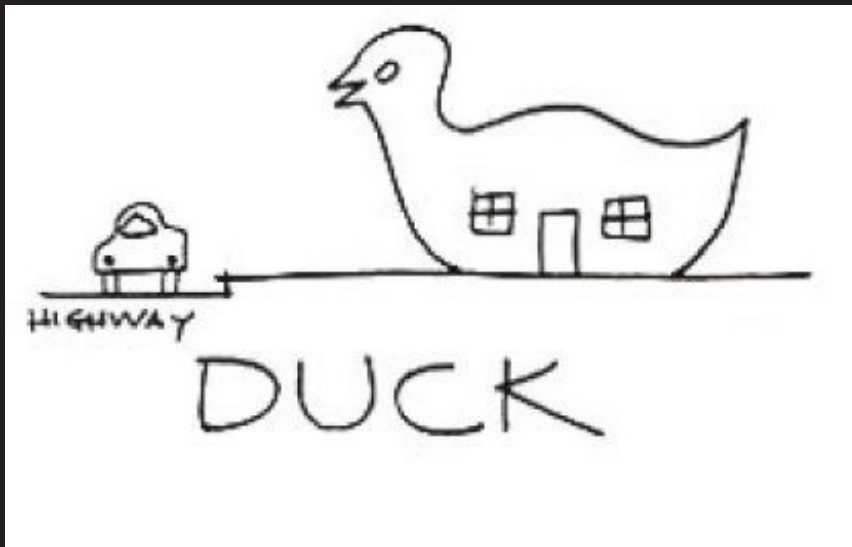


Affordances of place: commercial signs on the Ormeau Road, Belfast



## Signs say what buildings do not

- Venturi gives example to the necessity of signs in order to designate use and purpose of buildings by referring to the construction as either that of the duck or decorated shed
- On the arterial routes of Belfast this can be seen, as churches are obviously churches and police stations obviously police stations, through their architecture alone
- Many of the signs are displayed on Victorian terraced houses. The Victorian terrace itself does not give any indication through its architecture alone of the purpose of the business located within.



Venturi's example of duck and decorated shed. The duck is based on a building known as the 'long Island Duckling', where the building resembles that which it is, i.e. a duck.

## Where no sign is needed ...



Antrim Road, Belfast: A police station needs no sign to identify building purpose



Where no sign is needed ...



Ormeau Road, Belfast: The architecture of the building speaks clearly as to its purpose



## Signs needed to designate purpose ...

- Venturi compares signs to the 'badges' on cars, stating that 'the rate of obsolescence of a sign seems to be nearer to that of an automobile than that of a building'. The signs change through the time and lifecycle of the building as it adapts to different uses and may be 'pinned on later like a piece of costume jewellery'



Lisburn Road Belfast: Victorian terraces with signs and/or amendments made to architecture

# Aggregates of signs

- As with the internet, information is placed on the environment but seldom removed. Observation, through field studies, highlights just how many signs and aggregates of signs are present in the urban environment.



Signs on the Andersonstown Road: on the side of this one building are various types of signs.



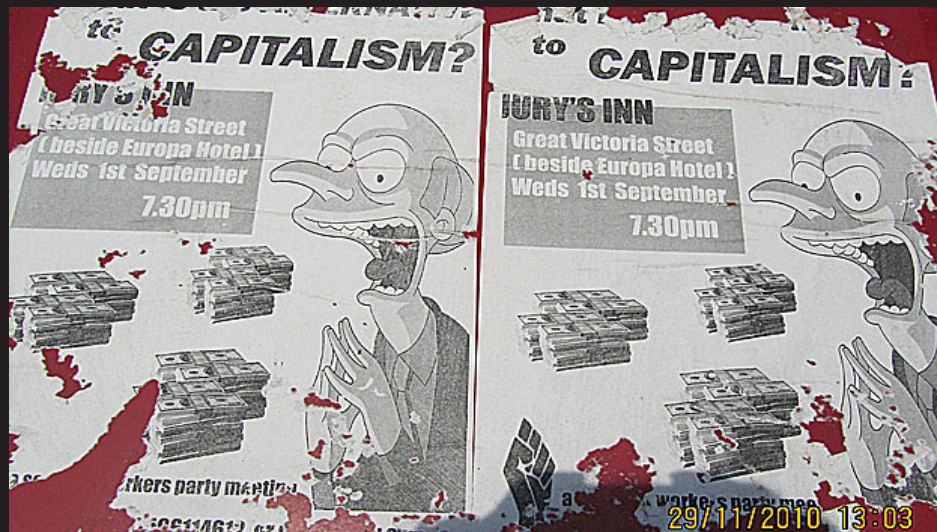
# Taxonomies of signs in the urban environment

- A viewer wishing to focus on commercial signs in the urban environment must first sift through the various other types of signs with which they are faced.



Graffiti





THE CRECHE  
PLACES  
AVAILABLE

! S O U P

SCHOOLWEAR  
SALE  
FROM £2.99

Billboards, posters and ad-hoc signs



Street signs

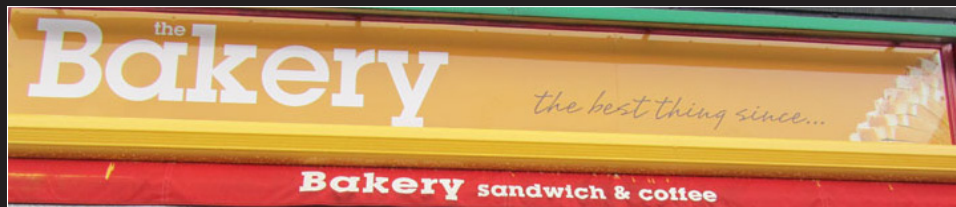


Murals



Regulatory and wayfinding signs





Commercial signs

# Amount of information in the urban environment

*'When we cross a street corner we encounter a complex array of signs and discourses. There are signs regulating vehicular traffic, there are signs regulating pedestrian traffic. We see lines painted on the street: some for pedestrians, some for automobiles, some for electrical workers who are to pull up a manhole to repair the lines underneath. We see commercial advertisements, public official notices, street and building identifications, graffiti, and pasted up notices for legal and even illegal goods and services'.*

– Scollon and Scollon

*'While information comes to us in quadrillions of bits, we don't perceive it in that way. The information reflected in bits comes to us, for example, as stories, documents, diagrams, pictures, or narratives, as knowledge and meaning and in communities, organizations, and institutions'.*

– Brown and Duguid

- Changing technology/production techniques mean designer not always included in process.  
People become co-creators of signs

*'We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants'.*

– Lynch



## Focussed/unfocussed interaction with signs

- The enigma of signs is that there are so many and yet, unless seeking, or searching, they may be perceived but without being the focus of attention. It may be possible to be aware of the amount of information surrounding the individual in the built environment without interacting fully with those signs.
- Perception dependent on focus of the wayfinder to the task at hand. It may also depend on whether or not the individual is completing the task of locating and reading the sign alone, or in the company of another.
- Goffman refers to, in his work on the interaction order, as whether or not the person is a 'single' or 'with'.



Singles' and 'withs': Rosemary Street, Belfast

## Other indicators on commercial signs - safe/unsafe places



Poorly presented, or broken signs, such as these on the Crumlin Road, Belfast, may help to indicate type of place. In this instance the signs are contextualized within an environment which may be perceived as holding some danger to the person of the individual who finds himself or herself there. The language of the sign here is significant.

## Other indicators on commercial signs - safe/unsafe places



Well-designed and expensively produced signs in a well-maintained environment in Belfast city-centre. The combined messages of signs and place would generally be perceived as comforting for the individual and indicate a place where he/she might feel safe.

## Wayfinding – commercial signs as part of cognitive map

- Another valuable function of the commercial sign is in aiding wayfinding, commercial signs, whilst not specifically wayfinding devices, do form part of a wayfinding network and mental map of place.
- Important for safety – vulnerability of being lost

*'Like an automatic recording device, my read-write head, capable as it is of reading existing data and accepting fresh input, has stored the routes, the return journeys'*

– Virilio

- They allow people to locate themselves in the environment, preventing them from becoming lost, guiding them forward to a destination, or enabling them to find their way back to where they came from.



## Socio-economic indicators on commercial signs - poor economy

- Allow insight as to whether a neighborhood is poor or economically successful, through their appearance and condition.



A struggling economy as evidenced in signs: painted car wash sign in Shaw's Road, Belfast

## Socio-economic indicators on commercial signs - healthy economy



Healthy economy as evidenced in signs: Lily's, bespoke expensive signage, Lisburn Road, Belfast



## Cultural indicators on commercial signs – Totemic



Newtownards  
Road. Belfast:

The commercial  
sign has its cultural  
roots emphasized  
through additional  
contextual information  
provided by the  
adjoining sign

## Cultural indicators on commercial signs – Traditional for Belfast



Antrim Road,  
Belfast:

The dual language of place, as evidenced through the aggregates of signs on this building, allow the viewer to recognize that this is a place where two cultures live. Here the two cultures are from the Protestant and Catholic communities in the area.



## Cultural indicators on commercial signs – Emerging



Ormeau Road: The changing nature of cultural composition in the city is indicated on this sign, where the two cultures of place are indicated through the use of language and colour



## Body and dress of a sign – compare to people – well dressed

- If we think of the sign as body and component parts as dress, similarly to how we would think of the appearance and dress of a person, there may be socio-cultural and economic indicators on the body or dress of the sign as to ethnicity, reinforced through observation of component parts as items of clothing. This might also indicate to us the apparent wealth, or lack thereof, of the sign and therefore of place.



A well-dressed sign: Beautiful lettering and expensive execution of materials on the Lisburn Road

Body and dress of a sign – compare to people – poorly dressed



Not so well dressed: bright colours, sans-serif lettering and poor execution of materials on the Newtownards Road. Note also the language, which serves to reinforce the message.



## Reinforcement of messages – from surrounding signs



Clusters of signs reinforcing messages about type of place this is: these signs on the Newtownards Road are poorly designed, executed in cheap materials, on fascias also in need of some repair. The colour-palette too indicates that the economy in this place may be suffering



## Reinforcement of messages – from surrounding signs



Clusters of signs reinforcing messages about type of place this is: these signs on the Lisburn Road are well designed and executed, on fascias in a good state of repair and using expensive materials. The colour palette in pinks, black, natural brick and metal, differs substantially from that of the Newtownards Road, previous.

## Surveillance and safety – people and eyes on the street

- In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* Jacobs observes how people use footpaths. Where there are clusters of buildings and signs, there are people – where there are people there are 'eyes on the street'.



Taken from inside a café in the centre of Belfast. People can observe others and as these public places are illuminated at night this combination of surveillance and good lighting creates a safer environment



## Surveillance and safety – illuminated boxes

- Even where there are eyes, without light this is not of much use 'good lighting augments every pair of eyes'.



Signs at night, encouraging safety by lighting up place and enabling good vision for surveillance.  
A useful series of 'illuminated boxes' combined together to give extra light to streets



# Chaos or Homogenization?

- While some may consider there to be too many signs, a bombardment of messages, without urban signs an environment might be rendered culturally neutral. There would be an absence of information and environmental cues. Ertep in In Chaos Or Homoginization?
- Using the example of Istikal Street, Beyoglu, Istanbul, Ertep illustrates the danger of enforcing overly zealous regulation on signs.
- 'Beautiful Beyoglu Project aimed to reintroduce and restore the historic identity of this district'. A traditional historical style was re-introduced for shop fascias, to support and authenticate the old, nostalgic identity of the streets...the signs had to visually match each other'.
- The chaos of signs was replaced by clones, each similar in their visual narrative and without self-expression with 'brass lettering on a wooden background, keeping to certain limits regarding size and format'.
- The character of place, as partly created through the diverse styles of fascia signs, became regulated, creating an enforced character, rather than one which had evolved over time with the input of diverse creators. Much of the perceptual value of signs was removed, standard colours and letterforms were used, allowing only for the message instructed by the municipality.

# Chaos or Homogenization? – Renewing The Routes

- Belfast City Council, Renewing the Routes programme. Noble intentions to revitalize the arterial routes

Projects take place on the main road frontage and can include:

- cosmetic improvements to building façades in commercial areas
- improvements to shared public spaces
- heritage site enhancement
- action on graffiti.

- Danger that the newly regenerated appearance is one that has been regulated.
- Consultation has taken place but decisions are being made, not by shop-owners, but by officials
- The character of place is no longer one formed over time, but enforced during a shorter time-span and according to established criteria.
- Whilst the original signs may have been worn, or damaged, they were original, created at a time and with the intentions of the creators, even the weathering, the patina, provides indications of time of creation, whereas, even with respect for historical precedents, new signs, whilst 'pretty' are duplicitous. They are pretenders, actors on the urban environment, they are neither original nor flawed and their perfection itself belies the character of place.

## Renewing The Routes results – Shankill Road



Shankill Road, Belfast: The sleek appearance of the new furniture sign above removes a temporal element, which might otherwise inform the viewer about age, origins and original character of the commercial premise



## Renewing The Routes results – Shankill Road



'Improvements' to signs on the Shankill Road, Belfast. Images show conformity of style to all shopfronts, using a neutralized colour-palette and sans-serif lettering.

## Renewing The Routes results – Newtownards Road



Limited of visual information about place: Images on Newtownards Road taken on the left, in 2011 and right, in 2012



# Conclusions

- Whether as sign-users we feel that there are too many commercial signs in our urban environments, that they are displeasing, or visual clutter, the value of these signs goes beyond their obvious function.
- They define the character of our urban spaces and give voice to cultural discourses.
- They locate businesses and affordances of place by day and bring people to place and illuminate at night to encourage safety and surveillance.
- They form part of our mental map allowing us to locate ourselves in a place and to enable wayfinding.
- They remain present whether they are the focus of our attention or not and continue to be active in relaying messages, whether we are reading those messages or not.
- They are never passive, by their number they can never become invisible, or be completely ignored and remain present around us as in the built environment.
- They have value beyond that which we would initially perceive them to have and inform us in ways we may not immediately be aware of.
- Without them our urban environment would lack character, voice and annotation to place.